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**STOPPING  
WATER POLLUTION  
AT ITS SOURCE**



**ESTIMATION OF ANALYTICAL METHOD  
DETECTION LIMITS (MDL)**

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QD  
75.4  
S8  
E771  
MOE  
MISA



**Environment  
Ontario**

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ESTIMATION OF ANALYTICAL METHOD DETECTION  
LIMITS (MDL)

Report prepared by:  
George Crawford  
Laboratory Services Branch  
Ontario Ministry of The Environment

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Ministère de l'Environnement de l'Ontario  
Évaluation des seuils de détection des méthodes d'analyse

Protocole relatif au calcul des seuils de détection  
des méthodes d'analyse pour  
la Stratégie municipale et industrielle de dépollution (SMID)

Ce protocole établit la marche à suivre pour évaluer la précision et le seuil de détection des méthodes d'analyse (SDM).

On analyse un nombre prédéterminé d'échantillons (soit de l'eau enrichie, soit des échantillons en double) suivant la méthode d'analyse prescrite et on utilise des formules statistiques courantes pour obtenir la précision.

On calcule ensuite le seuil de détection d'une méthode (SDM) en multipliant la précision par le facteur "Student's-t" approprié.

## Ontario Ministry of the Environment

### Estimation of Analytical Method Detection Limits (MDL)

#### Introduction

This protocol has been established to ensure a consistent approach to the development of method detection limit (MDL) estimates for the MISA program based on the use of fortified reagent (blank) water or evaluation of available routine within-run duplicate analyses. The MISA regulations has established criteria for maximum permitted laboratory MDL (LMDL). These criteria are referred to as the Regulation MDL (RMDL).

It should be noted that when MDL estimates are developed using clean samples (i.e. reagent (blank) water) they represent an optimum achievable value. MDLs obtained in this fashion are very useful for establishing performance criteria and allowing comparison of interlaboratory method capabilities, but may not be applicable in defining the quantitation capability for other samples which introduce matrix effects.

The following protocol represents a modification to that documented in the Federal Register/Vol. 49, No. 209/Friday, October 26, 1984/Appendix B to Part 136 - Revision 1.11.

This modification restricts the options listed in the original document and gives more direct instructions at other option points.

#### Definition

The method detection limit (MDL) is a statistically defined decision point such that measured results falling at or above this point are interpreted to indicate the presence of analyte in the sample with a specified probability, and assumes that there are no known sources of error in identification or biases in measurement.

For the purposes of this document, the MDL is defined as having a confidence limit of 99%. This confidence limit defines the multiplication factor used from Student's t-tables relating MDL to the analytical precision. This Student's t-value depends on the amount of data used to calculate the analytical precision. In general, analytical precision will depend on the analytical conditions and the sample matrix. When possible, precision will be determined by replicate analysis of typical low-level samples, with sufficient replication to provide a reasonable estimate.

### Scope and Application

This protocol is designed for application to a wide variety of sample types ranging from reagent (blank) water fortified with a known concentration of analyte to wastewater containing analyte. The MDL for an analytical procedure may vary as a function of sample type. The protocol requires a complete, specific, and well defined analytical method. It is essential that all sample processing steps of the analytical method be included in the determination of the method detection limit.

The MDL protocol was designed for application to a broad variety of physical and chemical methods. To accomplish this, the procedure was made device- or instrument- independent.

There are four options available for estimating the analytical precision:

- a) accumulation of a large number of in-run duplicate analyses of typical samples at levels not exceeding 10 times the estimated MDL;
- b) accumulation of in-run duplicate analyses of laboratory reagent quality water spiked with a known amount of the target analyte(s) at levels not exceeding 10 times the estimated MDL;
- c) analysis of eight replicate aliquots of a typical low level sample at levels not exceeding 10 times the estimated MDL;
- d) analysis of a series of eight replicate aliquots of laboratory reagent quality water spiked with a known amount of the target analyte(s) at a level not exceeding 10 times the estimated MDL.

When applied for the MISA program, the appropriate Regulation MDL shall be used in place of the 'estimated MDL' in the above options.

### Organics Analytes (MISA Test Groups 16-24, 26 and 27)

This protocol requires that option d) be used. The fortification of laboratory reagent (blank) water with a known level of analyte is required to standardize the protocol for all laboratories and minimize the problems associated with analyzing duplicate or replicate samples or finding a standard "matrix" for organics analysis. The analytical precision is established based on eight replicate analyses and the estimated MDL is derived from a combination of these measurements and the appropriate value from t-test tables. This option is not intended to assess the effect of matrix on the values obtained but rather to define a standardized approach in the development and application of interlaboratory performance criteria for the program. Proceed to step 1.

**Conventionals, Metals and Inorganics**

(MISA Test Groups 1-15 and 25)

This protocol allows any of the options a), b), c) or d) to be used. For option a) the laboratory should review recent data on in-run duplicates (data accumulated within the preceding 12-month period or less) and apply the formula as outlined in step 5b) to at least 40 data pairs. Proceed to step 5b) for option a) or b). Proceed to step 1 for option c) or d).

**Procedure**

1. Make an estimate of the detection limit using one of the following:
  - a) The concentration value that corresponds to an instrument signal/noise of 3:1.
  - b) The concentration equivalent of three times the standard deviation of replicate instrumental measurements of the analyte in reagent water.
  - c) That region of the standard curve where there is a significant change in sensitivity, i.e., a break in the slope of the standard curve.
  - d) Instrumental limitations.  
It is recognized that the experience of the analyst is important to this process. However, the analyst must include the above considerations in the initial estimate of the detection limit.
2. Prepare reagent (blank) water that is as free of analyte as possible. Reagent or interference free water is defined as a water sample in which analyte and interferent concentrations are not detected at the method detection limit of each analyte of interest. Interferences are defined as systematic errors in the measured analytical signal of an established procedure caused by the presence of interfering species (interferent). The interferent concentration is presupposed to be normally distributed in representative samples of a given matrix. The use of commercially obtained or laboratory prepared organic free water or cold potable tap water is acceptable but clearly indicate what was used.
3.
  - a) If the MDL is to be determined in reagent (blank) water, prepare a laboratory standard (analyte in reagent water) at a concentration which is at least 5 times, but not to exceed 10 times the estimated method detection limit. Proceed to Step 4.



- b) If the MDL is to be determined in another sample matrix, analyze the sample. If the measured level of the analyte is in the recommended range of one to five times the estimated method detection limit, proceed to Step 4.

If the measured level of analyte is less than the estimated method detection limit, add a known amount of analyte to bring the level of analyte between one and five times the estimated method detection limit.

If the measured level of analyte is greater than 5 times the estimated method detection limit, there are two options.

- 1) Obtain another sample with a lower level of analyte in the same matrix if possible.
  - 2) The sample may be used as is for determining the method detection limit if the analyte level does not exceed 10 times the MDL of the analyte in reagent water. The variance of the analytical method changes as the analyte concentration increases from the MDL, hence the MDL determined under these circumstances may not truly reflect method variance at lower analyte concentrations.
4. Take eight aliquots of the sample to be used to calculate the method detection limit and process each through the entire analytical method. Make all computations according to the defined method with final results in the method reporting units.

If a blank measurement is required to calculate the measured level of analyte, obtain a separate blank measurement for each sample aliquot analyzed. Calculate a result  $x$  for each sample/blank pair.

5. a) For option c) and d), 8 replicates of a typical low level sample or spiked reagent water, calculate the standard deviation ( $S$ ) of the replicate measurements as follows:

$$S = \sqrt{\left[ \frac{\sum (x_i - \bar{x})^2}{(n-1)} \right]}$$

where:

$x_i$  = the analytical results in the final method reporting units for the eight replicate aliquots ( $i = 1$  to 8)  
 $\bar{x}$  = the average of the eight replicate measurements

- b) For option a) and b), assessment of historic within run duplicate analysis data, calculate the standard deviation (S) of the duplicate measurements as follows:

$$S = \sqrt{\left[ \frac{\sum (x_1 - x_2)_i^2}{(2n)} \right]}$$

where:

$x_1, x_2$  = the two replicate results for each of the  $n$  duplicate pairs (minimum  $n = 40$ )

6. a) Compute the MDL as follows:

$$MDL = t_{(n-1, \alpha=0.01)} S$$

where:

$t_{(n-1, \alpha=0.01)}$  is the Student's value appropriate for a 99% confidence level given the degrees of freedom  $n-1$ .

$S$  = the standard deviation as determined above.

**Tables of Student's t Values at the  
99 Percent Confidence Level**

Number of Replicates	Degree of Freedom	t (n-1)
7	6	3.143
8	7	2.998
9	8	2.897
10	9	2.821
11	10	2.764
16	10	2.603
21	20	2.528
26	25	2.485
31	30	2.457
$\infty$	$\infty$	2.369

## 7.0 Reporting

Report the calculated MDL to two significant figures (e.g. 0.032). The analytical method used must be specifically identified by number or title and the MDL for each analyte expressed in the appropriate method reporting units. If the analytical method permits options which affect the method detection limit, these conditions must be specified with the MDL value. Report the mean analyte level with the MDL and indicate if the MDL procedure was iterated. If a laboratory standard or a sample that contained a known amount analyte was used for this determination, also record the mean recovery.

## 8.0 Treatment of Outliers

### **Single Analyte Methods**

If one of the results can be shown to be an 'outlier' by the Dixon test (described below), AND the LMDL calculated for the remaining seven replicates (3.143 times S) is less than RMDL, this latter estimate of LMDL will be accepted.

### **Scans:**

Certain methods permit analysis of several analytes within a single 'scan'. The LMDL for each analyte in the scan must be less than the corresponding RMDL. When the LMDL's tend to bracket the RMDL's, the overall method is not sensitive enough and the LMDL's will not be considered acceptable.

However, if only a few of the LMDL's in a 'scan' exceed their respective RMDL's, there may be outliers within the set of eight replicates for these non-complying analytes. If this can be confirmed, as described above, for each of the non-complying analytes, then the LMDL based on seven replicates (3.143 times S) will be accepted for those few analytes.

To forestall the possibility that one replicate sample may be an outlier for all or most analytes in the scan, and that the calculated LMDL's therefore will be greater than RMDL for several analytes, the analyst may choose the following option:

- Perform eleven replicates (rather than eight).
- For each analyte, note which replicate gives the highest and the lowest results.
- Reject the sample replicate containing the greatest number of high results.
- Reject the sample replicate containing the greatest number of low results.
- Reject the sample with the greatest number of high and low results.
- Calculate LMDL's for each analyte using the remaining eight replicate samples.

If this procedure fails to indicate an LMDL for each analyte which is below the respective RMDL, redefine the method (for example, larger sample aliquot, different range expansion, etc.), retrain staff, and repeat the entire procedure for estimating RMDL for all analytes in the scan. Discard all previous replicate data.

Outlier procedure: Dixon's Test for sample size;  $n = 8$  to  $10$ .

- i) sort the replicate values from lowest to highest  
 $r_1, r_2, \dots, r_{(n-1)}, r_n$ ;
- ii) determine the difference between the suspect value and the next to last value and its nearest neighbour  
 $r_1 - r_2$  (or  $r_n - r_{(n-1)}$ );
- iii) determine the difference between the suspect value and the next to last value at the opposite end of the sorted list of values  $r_1 - r_{(n-1)}$ , (or  $r_n - r_2$ );
- iv) calculate the ratio of ii) divided by iii);
- v) if the ratio is greater than 0.55 the value  $r_1$  (or  $r_n$ ) is considered to be an outlier (<5% risk of error).

Natrella, M.G. "Experimental Statistics", NBS Handbook 91, (1966)  
 USGPO, Washington, D.C.



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